

The Real "Uncle Remus" and His Letters

THE following letter, which relates to the matrimonial adventures of one of the most celebrated heroes in American literature, has not been published:

"31 January, 1881.

"To Master —

"ESTEEMED SIR: The inquiries made by your private secretary have been received by Uncle Remus, who has given them his attention and authorizes me to respond, which I take great pleasure in doing—as nearly as possible in Uncle Remus's own words:

"You k'n des take en tell dat little chap dat nigh ez I kin git at it, ole Brer Rabbit, he marry Miss Molly Cottontail, wich wuz wunner de gals w'at Miss Meadows had livin' long wid 'er. En den long time after dat, wiles he wuz a widder he tuck'n marry ole Miss Fox. Ez ter me I ain't puttin' no 'pennunee in dat, kaze Brer Rabbit wunner deze yer kinder mens w'at sticks upter his own color. Dat Tobe, he 'uz wunner de wuss chilluns in de naberhoods, en he keep on gwine on fum bad ter wuss twel bimby he run up wid Mr. Dog, en us sooner do he do dis, dan he gets naps nabbed. Bad chilluns ain't see no peace twel dey gits good."

"Trusting, dear sir, that this will prove satisfactory, I remain,

"Faithfully yours,

"JOEL C. HARRIS."

Shyest of Men.

Like many another shy and modest genius, Joel Chandler Harris revealed himself delightfully in his correspondence with family and friends. Fortunately for the preservation of the outlines of an unusually charming and original personality, a great many of his letters are still in existence. Fortunately, also, Mr. Harris had the habit in his youth of keeping scrap books, so that *The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris*, by Julia Collier Harris, makes most interesting reading.

More ambitious and analytical biographers frequently fail to present as vivid a picture of their subject as Mrs. Harris does in this unpretentious account of her father-in-law, and few have the good fortune to deal with a nature as finely sensitive and genuinely modest and lovable as that of the creator of Uncle Remus. While success and experience in life brought serenity to the spirit of Joel Harris it never effaced his modest habit of self-depreciation, or the native shyness which in his youth brought him intense suffering.

In New York in 1882.

Mrs. Harris gives an interesting account of "father's" first visit to New York in 1882, about six months after the letter which we have printed was written. Robert Underwood Johnson arranged a sightseeing itinerary for the distinguished Southern visitor, which was to include a "ride down Broadway from Delmonico's on top of a stage," a visit to the Tribune Building, the Astor House, Trinity Church, Castle Garden and one of the "big new ocean liners"; also a ride down Fifth avenue from Forty-fifth street on a bus. The Tile Club gave a dinner at which the Georgian humorist made a great hit, but was too bashful to make a speech or tell a story. "Hop" Smith was a fellow guest and not being afflicted with this malady he came to the rescue and recited one of the Uncle Remus stories. The fol-

lowing day a second festivity was arranged and an unwilling acceptance dragged from "Uncle Remus," but his pilot, Capt. Howell, happened to leave Mr. Harris alone for a short time in the hotel where they were stopping, and the recollection of the horrible ordeal of the Tile Club dinner became so vivid in the guest of honor's mind that he packed his bag and departed by stealth for home, abandoning in his panic a long planned trip to Hartford to visit Mark Twain.

The Tar-Baby and T. R.

In 1917 Theodore Roosevelt wrote: "When I became President I set my heart on having Joel Chandler Harris as guest at the White House. But to get him there proved no easy task! He was a very shy, sensitive, retiring man, who shrank from all publicity, and to whom it was really an agony to be made much of in public."

Of that celebrated visit the Washington correspondent of THE SUN said: "The older Harris and the younger Harris left Atlanta yesterday and got here today. It was a very reticent Uncle Remus who sat around a local hotel and waited for the time to come when he must depart for the White House. He didn't care to discuss nature faking or to say whether he thought that the President wanted to ask him if he really and truly believed that a rabbit and a fox could hold conversations in negro dialect. He denied, however, that the President had been urging him for some time to dine at the White House. The newspaper story to that effect was a human nature fake, he said. There had been one invitation only, he explained, and that had been accepted promptly. . . . Midnight—Mr. Harris has not returned to his hotel. The White House is ablaze with light. It is said that Mr. Harris is telling the story of Brer Rabbit and the Tar-Baby."

As is often the case with literary work which becomes immortal, Uncle Remus was an "accident." When Joel Chandler Harris went to the Atlanta Constitution from the Savannah News the former

paper had been printing a column of anecdotes of negro character by a Mr. Small. Upon the withdrawal of Mr. Small from the staff of the paper it became a part of the work of the new assistant editor to fill up this column. Harris drew on his childhood memories and Uncle Remus was the result. When asked as to his inspiration for the character of the negro raconteur, the author said: "He was not an invention of my own, but a human syndicate, I might say, of three or four old darkies whom I had known. I just walloped them together into one person and called him 'Uncle Remus.'"

No writer was ever more astonished by the success of his work than was Joel Harris in the case of *Uncle Remus*. He was astonished when approached by a publisher offering to give permanency to the stories in book form, astonished at the overwhelming success of the volume and perennially and humorously astonished at the stir created by his darky philosopher in learned philological and folk lore circles. In the introduction to the first *Uncle Remus* book Harris, with characteristic modesty, refers to his study of negro character as a "sympathetic supplement" to the work of Mrs. Stowe. Without underestimating the phenomenal moral and political influence of *Uncle Tom*, there can be no doubt at this date as to which character is entitled to the higher rank both as a work of art and as the typical exposition of a race in a stage of its evolution.

Joel Harris to Charles A. Dana.

Mrs. Harris records a prediction of Mr. Dana's, transmitted to her father-in-law by Mr. Derby of the firm of Appletons, which time has amply verified. "*Uncle Remus* is a great book," Mr. Dana said. "It will not only have a large but a permanent sale." In connection with this remark it may be of interest to print here Mr. Harris's expression of appreciation in a letter to Mr. Dana to which we happen to have access. On the 15th of January, 1885, Mr. Harris wrote to Mr. Dana as follows:

"I am almost sure I answered your letter relating to a poem in negro dialect. I did not answer it promptly because when it arrived I was too ill to write, and I remained so for several weeks thereafter; but it seems to me that I made haste to reply as soon as I could. Perhaps the letter miscarried; perhaps it fell under the eye and into the clutches of your famous office cat.

"What I intended to say—if I did not say it—was that the poem you enclosed is perfect of its kind, and that I am sincerely sorry I cannot say to you that Uncle Remus is the author. But that poor old man never did so well—never succeeded in embodying in his songs the embryo mysticism that is one of the features or characteristics of the negro mind—though he did make a serious attempt in *The Plough-Hand's Song*. It is easy to see that the poem is not a transcription, but an interpretation—and it is so successful that I am puzzled as to its authorship; for it is a little beyond the reach of those who have gained notoriety by means of their dialect writing.

"In answering your letter—or in intending to answer it—it was my purpose

to thank you for some kind words you said to Mr. Derby in regard to my writings. They were very encouraging at the time, and the remembrance of them has aided me more than I can tell you."

THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS. By JULIA COLLIER HARRIS. Houghton Mifflin Company. \$3.50.



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by valentine williams

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t h o m a s

by h. b. cresswell

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